DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 047 821 24 PS 004 492

AUTHOR	Cooney, Joan Ganz
TITLE	The First Year of Sesame Street: A History and Overview. Final Report, Volume I of V Volumes.
INSTITUTION	Children's Television Workshop, New York, N.Y.
SPONS AGENCY	National Center for Educational Research and Development (DHEW/CE), Washington, D.C.; Office of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C. Bureau of Research.
BUREAU NO	BR-8-0475
PUB DATE	Dec 70
GRANT	OEG-0-8-080475-3743 (007)
NOTE	25p.
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Disadvantaged Youth, Educational Objectives, *Educational Television, *Learning Processes, Middle Class, *Preschool Children, Program Evaluation, Stimulation, *Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS	Childrens Television Workshop, *Sesame Street

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the evolution of the Children's Television Workshop, which was originally suggested in a study made by Joan Ganz Cooney for the Carnegie Corporation, and which was responsible fcr the development and production of the daily, 1-hour educational program, "Sesame Street:" As envisioned in the Carnegie proposal, the program was to combine entertainment value with solid educational matter. The target audience was to be inner-city disadvantaged children from 3 to 5 years of age. Briefly outlined in this overview are instructional goals, pre-production research and planning, funding, methods of evaluation, future plans, and general conclusions of the first-year evaluation report submitted by the Educational Testing Service. (NH)

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PA-24
BR-8-0475

FINAL REPORT, Volume I of V Volumes

OE Bureau of Research No. 8-0475
Grant No. OEG-0-8-080475-3743 (007)

THE FIRST YEAR OF SESAME STREET:

A HISTORY AND OVERVIEW

The Staff of Children's Television Workshop

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ED047821

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The research reported herein was performed pursuant to a grant with the Office of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Contractors undertaking such projects under Government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their professional judgment in the conduct of the project. Points of view or opinions stated do not, therefore, necessarily represent official Office of Education position or policy.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This history is the first volume of five making up the final report over the first experimental season of "Sesame Street." The volumes are as follows:

Volume I: THE FIRST YEAR OF SESAME STREET: A History and Overview

The Staff of Children's Television Workshop
Joan Ganz Cooney, President

Volume II: THE FIRST YEAR OF SESAME STREET: The Formative Research

Barbara Frengel Reeves
(Foreword by Edward L. Palmer)

Volume III: THE FIRST YEAR OF SESAME STREET: An Evaluation

Samuel Ball and Gerry Ann Bogatz

Volume IV: THE FIRST YEAR OF SESAME STREET: A Summary of Audience Surveys

Compiled by Bruce Samuels

Volume V: PRE-READING ON SESAME STREET

Samuel Y. Gibbon, Jr. and Edward L. Palmer

In its first year of operation the Children's Television Workshop set out to reach as high a percentage as possible of the "forgotten" television audience of three-, four-, and five-year-olds in this country. Disadvantaged children of the inner-city were a priority target. The first "Sesame Street" hour was broadcast on November 10, 1969. Within a few months, the now familiar animated numbers and letters and problem-solving games of "Sesame Street" were being viewed enthusiastically by more than 50 per cent of the program's potential audience - by an estimated seven million children. A new concept of teaching by television and new audience-building techniques to assure regular and growing attendance were at work. The Workshop was well underway in what has been described by independent observers as the first massive test of the power of television as an educational instrument.

C.T.W. was begun as an experiment. In spite of its success in reaching and holding a vast audience of preschool children in its first season, and in spite of evidence of its educational effectiveness, it continues still on an experimental basis - revising format and content of program as experience is accumulated and as evaluation studies are completed, discovering new means of building audience, planning future series. In the wider context of television's role in society, the program is also experimental. Its greatest lasting influence may well prove to be its effect on the development of television generally in the service of the public.

From the outset, a generous period of pre-production preparation was allowed for, along with the necessity for thorough and continuing

research, unorthodox special promotion to assist in organizing an audience, and careful, expensive production techniques to assure programs of only the highest professional quality. All this required heavy funding. Due to the imagination and vision of many individuals who became involved in the C.T.W. idea - in public and in private life, in government and in foundations - all this has been possible. As C.T.W. moves into its second operational year it is incumbent on us briefly to review the conceptual ideas and programmed steps that led to this position of unusual strength.

THE CONCEPT DEFINED

The idea of the Children's Television Workshop grew out of a study Joan Ganz Cooney made for the Carnegie Corporation beginning in 1966. Mrs. Cooney, who, at the time, was a public affairs producer for New York's educational TV station, WNDT, was asked by Lloyd N. Morrisett, then vice president of Carnegie, to examine the potential uses of television for preschool education. Coincidentally, this was a period of intensified examination of the educational problems of the disadvantaged child. Attention was being directed to the preschool years, and educators and psychologists were beginning to believe that the achievement gap between disadvantaged and middle class children could best be narrowed by injecting intellectual stimulation into the early years of the disadvantaged. Paralleling this theory was the belief that the learning process should be started earlier for all children and that educators no longer could ignore the first five years of a child's development. New educational findings proclaimed that by the time a child reaches four years, half of all his growth in

intelligence will have occurred.

The cost of putting 12 million children in this age group in classrooms was clearly prohibitive. One blackboard, however, was almost universally available: the omnipresent television screen. Existing television programs for children were mostly entertainment, largely lacking in educational content, or else they were aimed primarily at a middle class audience. The program envisioned in the Carnegie proposal would combine entertainment value with solid educational matter. In the words of the report, "The children's program we propose would be unique in several ways: education is its primary aim and entertainment the means; it attempts to reach a lower as well as a middle class audience; and expensive, popular production techniques would be used to accomplish these goals."

To have any impact on the already extensive viewing habits of children (children under six were then accustomed to watching 54.1 hours of television a week), the program, it was felt, ought to be one hour in length and shown once, or preferably twice, daily five days a week. Along with a production staff of experts, augmented by willing outside creative talents, the program would require two services nearly equal in importance to the central function of production: research and evaluation to test the program materials and make sure the program was influencing and benefiting its audience, and promotion, or utilization as its function was named, to make sure of reaching the largest possible audience.

The executive staff was to be composed of Mrs. Cooney as Executive Director with Robert Davidson as Assistant Director, David D. Connell

as Executive Producer, Dr. Edward L. Palmer as Research Director, and Robert A. Hatch as Director of Information and Utilization.

The Workshop would seek to work within the broadcast framework of National Educational Television to create, in effect, a classroom without walls, nationwide and infinitely expandable, capable of reaching into ghetto neighborhoods and remote rural outposts and, it was hoped, of raising the level of education equally for preschool children everywhere. It was to be regarded as an experiment - but one with minimum risks and great possibilities.

FUNDING THE PROJECT

The possibilities were immediately perceived by the executives of the Carnegie Corporation, in particular Morrisett and Alan Pifer, the president. In the absence of the availability of sufficient public support for preschool education, foundations, they agreed, ought to step in. The budget for an initial year of research and a second year for producing and airing 130 hours of original programming was fixed at $8 million. This figure, while large for any one series of programs on educational television, seemed reasonable when one weighed the alternative cost of sending all preschool children to school. Without counting the construction of new classrooms, the expense of educating all four-year-olds in public schools four years ago was calculated at $2.75 billion; inflation has certainly boosted this figure well beyond the three billion mark today. In the summer of 1967 the cost of providing 465,000 youngsters with eight weeks of Head Start was $127 million.

But the $8 million initial bill for the Children's Television

Workshop was too big to be met by Carnegie alone. Carnegie found its first enthusiastic partner in the Ford Foundation which itself had done pioneering work in public broadcasting and in the United States Office of Education, which agreed to meet 50% of the budget. Among the other principal funding sources for the first two years were the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity, The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities, the John and Mary Markle Foundation, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Together, these organizations were able to give the strongest possible start to the Workshop - not only in money but also in counsel and encouragement.

THE PRE-PRODUCTION PERIOD

A substantial portion of the budget was devoted to pre-production preparations. "Sesame Street" was to become probably the most thoroughly researched and thought-out program in the history of American television. After a nucleus of a staff was brought together, the Workshop sought outside advice and assistance to outline the educational content of the programs. Five three-day seminars were held during the summer of 1968 bringing together the views and suggestions of educators, psychologists, televisions experts, child development specialists, creators of film animation, filmakers, children's book writers, and advertising designers (see Appendix C). The seminars dealt with various aspects of child education, including social, moral, and affective development; language and reading; mathematical and numerical skills; reason and problem solving, and perception. Out of

these seminars came the formulation of a set of instructional goals for the programs. The sort of expert assistance provided by these panels survives in the extremely active C.T.W. National Advisory Board headed by Dr. Gerald S. Lesser, of the Harvard University Graduate School of Education (see Appendix A).

While the production staff got busy translating the instructional goals into animation and film segments, the administrative staff worked to secure optimum time slots for the program in the schedules of the affiliated stations of N.E.T., which was to handle the distribution of "Sesame Street" by live interconnection, videotape duplication, or a combination of the two. Prime time for the audience C.T.W. hoped to reach was between nine and eleven o'clock in the morning. To secure clearance of this valued morning time, when many N.E.T. affiliates had income-producing in-class programming, required many cross-country persuasion visits by Mrs. Cooney and Mr. Davidson to the offices of school superintendents and local station managers. Valuable support in this effort came from John W. Macy Jr., president of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a staunch supporter of the project. By start-up time in November 1969, they had been able to clear choice morning time on nearly a hundred educational stations.

To be able to reach and interest black four-year-olds in the inner-city, the C.T.W. staff was convinced, was to reach the middle class child also. Of considerable assistance in winning the attention of the disadvantaged was the presence of a television set in 90 per cent of households with an annual income of under $5,000. The first efforts of C.T.W.'s Utilization Department were directed to making the

inner-city household aware of the coming "Sesame Street." Various promotional campaigns were conducted, including the use of cruising sound trucks, broadsides and leaflets, school posters, spot announcements on radio and television, and house-to-house canvassing. The Workshop was fortunate in gaining the wholehearted cooperation of a number of social organizations and community groups.

But in the end the program itself was its own best press agent. Once the "Sesame Street" series began, there was a rapid build-up of audience. Within a few weeks viewership mushroomed to 1.2 million homes. By May, toward the end of the first season, the ratings had soared to 3.2 million homes daily. Taking into account multiple viewing, C.T.W. could count its total audience in 7 millions.

FROM RESEARCH INTO PRODUCTION

Preceding the airing of the first program, careful research into the viewing habits of children was conducted by Dr. Palmer, who at the University of Oregon had previously made a specialty of studying this phenomenon of the television age. As each piece of programming in film or animation was finished by Mr. Connell's production staff, it would be subjected to rigorous tests before live audiences of children in specially chosen day care centers. All materials were tested for 1) appeal and 2) effectiveness. In this way, the finished programs represented an honest collaboration between television producers and a full-time staff of educational researchers. Dr. Palmer developed special techniques for conducting this research. He invented the "distractor," a slide projector placed at right angles to the test TV screen before which the child was placed. If the television program

failed to hold interest, the child's attention would stray to the distractor screen. By measuring intervals of diversion, Dr. Palmer was able to gauge the audience interest of any piece of program material, moment to moment, and compare the relative appeal of existing popular children's television material with the product C.T.W. was producing.

Instructional goals had been set in December 1968 and divided into three main categories: 1) symbolic representation or letters, numbers, and geometric forms; 2) problem solving and reasoning, including recognition of parts of the body, visual discrimination among objects or pictures, and understanding of relational concepts such as size, shape, position, and distance; and 3) natural environment, including city and country, objects and people, and features indigenous to each, and the family and home environment, together with simple rules of behavior and fair play.

"SESAME STREET" IS CREATED

Each program was so constructed as to include some learning material from each of these main teaching categories. Learning units were packed into stories, skits, games, songs, and into the 30- and 60-second animation sequences patterned after commercial spots on television. These were slipped into the program with no more warning or preparation than the viewer is given for the station-break spots on commercial television.

Preliminary research had shown that puppets and animation produced the liveliest response in children. Program content broke down about 50 per cent live, featuring the program's hosts or puppets,

and 50 per cent animation or live action film and videotape inserts. The live hosts were Gordon and Susan, both black, and Bob and Mr. Hooper, who are white. A strong black image for the program was deliberately sought and from time to time was reinforced by the guest appearances of James Earl Jones, Harry Belafonte, and Bill Cosby. A set of muppets (part marionette, part puppet) was specially created for the show by Jim Henson, and now the broad squashed face of Ernie, the elongated disapproval of Bert, the raffish charm of Oscar, and the gangling awkwardness of Big Bird are nationally recognized features.

Five months ahead of the national broadcasts, in June 1969, five prototype shows were broadcast on a UHF channel in Philadelphia and the reactions of a preselected audience were closely studied. On the basis of these showings certain adjustments in the programs were made and some new muppet characters added. In mid-September C.T.W. moved into regular production, videotaping live action by the hosts and puppets and editing into the program the filmed and animated sequences. Beginning November 10, 1969 regular programming began.

The reception of "Sesame Street" by the American public, child and adult, is considered something of a television phenomenon. Following a wave of advance publicity the program was favorably received by virtually all major newspapers, magazines, and journals of learning. All season the mail response was heavy. The ratings went up steadily. At the end of the season the program received television's major prizes, including three Emmy Awards and a Peabody Award.

FIRST EVALUATION OF RESULTS

The first statistical evidence of how well the program was doing in its chosen area of concentration - the inner-city ghetto - came midway in the season. In March 1970, an independent study of viewing habits was made in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, a predominately black low-income area geographically larger than Harlem. Since rating services tend to reflect the viewing preferences of the more affluent middle class, C.T.W. commissioned the firm of Daniel Yankelovich, Inc. to make an independent evaluation. They proceeded by canvassing households where at least one working television set was in use, where one or more preschool children lived, and where the annual income level was not higher than $5,000. The results show that the program reached 90 per cent of its potential audience in these homes, that, by conservative estimate, 60 per cent were regular or daily viewers and that 32 per cent watched the program more than once a day. Some credit for these excellent figures must go to the availability to Brooklyn viewers of "Sesame Street" on a popular commercial channel and, indeed, in Washington, D.C., where the program was seen only on a UHF channel the results were less impressive. The Yankelovich figures were very nearly duplicated in East Harlem among predominately Spanish-speaking families and in Chicago where was exposure only on educational television (see Volume IV). The research staff also conducted program effectiveness surveys in day care centers in Tennessee, Long Island, and Maine, using an equal number of non-viewing children as controls, with good results (see Volume II).

REFUNDED AND RENEWED

Halfway through the first season, "Sesame Street's" public - parents, day care center teachers, station managers, acting in behalf of the children - began persistently to ask if the program would be renewed. Informally, the major funding sources indicated their continuing support but it was not until mid-March that the necessary clearances and approvals allowed for the announcements of a new and expanded season. The budget for the 1971 fiscal year was set at $6 million plus - lower than the first year because the start-up costs were behind and much of the first-year material was reusable. Heavier sums were allocated for the utilization function ($1 million as opposed to the first year's $600,000) and for research for additional educational programs suggested by the success of "Sesame Street." In the new budget the number of programs to be produced was increased from 130 to 145 and the number of broadcast outlets increased to 200 public television stations and some 50 commercial stations which broadcast the series as a public service. Once again the U.S. Office of Education came forward with the major financing. The other large funding sources continued: Carnegie, Ford, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. From the business sector came some valuable special purpose grants. Quaker Oats and General Foods both offered to underwrite additional week-end and evening "Sesame Street" showings outside of the regularly scheduled times. Mobil Oil will underwrite the publication of a high circulation Sesame Street Magazine to appear four times a year. This will replace the Parent/Teacher Guide of last season, a million copies of which were distributed, most of them free, each month. The printing costs were

almost exactly met by 120,000 paid subscriptions at $2 each.

As the Workshop, with a staff now numbering one hundred twenty-five, began to prepare for a new season it underwent structural change. In April 1970, it was announced that C.T.W. had been incorporated as an independent production company. Joan Ganz Cooney was named president. Lloyd N. Morrisett, formerly with Carnegie and now president of the Markle Foundation, and from the start a prime mover of the C.T.W. project, became chairman of the Board of Trustees.

PLANNING AHEAD

Success brought a host of new responsibilities and opportunities to the Children's Television Workshop. The chances for expansion in many directions seemed both limitless and bewilderingly complex. Foreign interest in the project had been present from the outset. As the program gained in popularity the overseas requests for "Sesame Street" mounted. The staff recognized certain difficulties in foreign transplantation without local modification of so intrinsically American an idea but they were eager, too, to test the universality of the concept. Before the end of 1970 twenty-six foreign countries will be seeing the first year's programs. Foreign production centers will be licensed to produce local versions of the program employing their own actors, producers, writers, cartoonists, and filmmakers but drawing on C.T.W. for technical support. There will be some reuse of puppets, animation, and documentary film. The first overseas taping is expected to take place early in 1971. In the Spring of 1970, in order to assist in the expansion activity, Michael H. Dann left a high post in commercial broadcasting to join the Children's Television Workshop staff as Vice

President and Assistant to the President.

Moving chronologically a step or two beyond "Sesame Street" on the learning scale, C.T.W. in 1971 will produce a series of television programs to improve the reading skills of seven-to-ten-year-olds in direct furtherance of the ten-year "Right to Read" program of the U.S. Office of Education. A research team is already at work under the guidance of producer Samuel Y. Gibbon.

A non-broadcast materials division has been established to handle the demand and need for books, filmstrips, and records based on "Sesame Street" materials and to create printed materials to accompany the new reading show.

Taking precedence over all new projects, however, is C.T.W.'s continuing commitment to the three-, four-, and five-year-old children - to reach more of them, and to teach them more effectively. Local utilization offices have been established in 12 major cities, including Los Angeles, Oakland, Detroit, Dallas, Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Boston. The field staff of utilization coordinators promote viewer-ship, enlist community support, and establish viewing centers in order to boost the audience for "Sesame Street" to a still higher percentage of the nation's 12 million preschoolers.

THE FIRST-YEAR REPORT CARD

After one year, what sort of marks can the teacher be given? C.T.W. put the ultimate grading of the program in the hands of an independent specialists, the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, N.J. E.T.S. based its year-long study on close-in observation and detailed questioning of children in Boston, Massachusetts, Durham, North

Carolina, Phoenix, Arizona, suburban Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and rural northeastern California - giving both a geographic and a socio-economic mix to the findings. Among the general conclusions of the report, written by Dr. Samuel Ball and Gerry Ann Bogatz, were that gains in learning "increase steadily with the amount of viewing," the younger the child the more dramatic the gain, and the greatest gains were made in letters, numbers, forms, and classification tests. Less pronounced were the gains in understanding of body parts but here children simply knew more about the subject to begin with and therefore registered less emphatically in the "before" and "after" ratings (see Volume III).

The E.T.S. report card tended to uphold the hoped-for universality of "Sesame Street." Without discrimination, disadvantaged inner-city children, advantaged suburban children, isolated rural children, black children and white children, all benefited measurably. And the most important factor in determining the gains made was not I.Q., not previous educational attainments, not home background, not place or circumstance of viewing, but simply how many times the child saw "Sesame Street."

The returns, nevertheless, are not all in. The program is still experimental. Eventually it is on how well prepared "Sesame Street" children are for classroom work and for live teacher relationships that the lasting worth of the program will be judged. Preliminary findings suggest initial success in meeting one of the primary goals, namely, putting the disadvantaged child on an equal footing with his more fortunate and better motivated middle class peer when they both arrive together at the doorway of formal education. And still further

down the road from that event lies the possible influence this series of experimental programs may have on awakening television's own sense of responsibility toward its large public, of whatever age.

APPENDICES

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the people whose names appear in the following sections. They provided invaluable assistance throughout the planning and production stages of the first year of "Sesame Street."

APPENDIX A: NATIONAL ADVISORY BOARD

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